

## Riding a Bicycle on a Tightrope

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August 18, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Society, Coralville, Iowa

When my sons Jeremiah and Isaac were growing up, our family enjoyed visiting science museums. Jeremiah and Isaac especially liked the COSI Science Museum in Toledo, Ohio, only a couple hours from where we lived near Ann Arbor, Michigan. COSI had lots of hands-on exhibits. So we went to explore there several times. One of those times, when the boys were about 9 and 6, we were surprised when we got inside to see a heavy cable strung across an area in the lobby that was open to floor below. And someone was riding a bicycle across the cable.

As we got closer, we realized that it wasn't some professional showing off their skill and talent on the high wire, but visitors were standing in line to take a turn riding this bicycle on a tightrope. There was a sign nearby explaining the science behind this. Of course, they had special wheels and parts on the bicycle to hold it on the wire, and there was a special mechanism with a seatbelt to hold the rider securely on the seat. There was also a large weight underneath the bicycle, heavy enough that if the bike just started tipping slightly in one direction or the other, the heavy weight would pull it back upright. We watched for a little while, but none of us had any interest in attempting to ride the bicycle.

So we explored the museum together as a family, then my husband (now former husband) Carter and Jeremiah, our older son, decided to wait in line for a special exhibit that was some kind of roller coaster simulator. So Isaac and I visited several other areas of the museum.

When we got back, Carter and Jeremiah were still in line. So Isaac and I watched a few more people ride the bicycle, and suddenly I decided that I wanted to try riding that bicycle. There was something attractive about experiencing directly something I could believe in theoretically. I wanted the experience of flying in midair, with only my feet to power me, and only a bicycle on a rope to support me.

So I waited in line, and when it was my turn, I was asked my name, and if I understood why I would not fall off the bicycle. They wanted to make sure I was in my right mind!

Then I climbed on, had my safety harness fastened, and pedaled away -- backwards.

They had it set up so that you had to go backwards first – so that when you were farthest from the safety of the platform, you were in the more comfortable and familiar position of peddling forward to get back to the starting platform. I felt almost lightheaded and giddy, I had butterflies in my stomach, but I also felt wonderful – almost like I was flying! When I had pedaled far enough backwards, I then pedaled forward to get back to the platform, and finally put my feet solidly down once again.

The experience only lasted a couple of minutes. But the metaphor of that experience has given me insights into life as I face the unknown and go through change.

I'd like to suggest five things that may help to guide us through change.

- 1) Grounding our experience in the here and now – are we breathing, do we trust our eyes and our hearts that the science and the bicycle both work; take a few breaths, look and listen right around you, sense what your body is feeling and telling you in the moment
- 2) Recognizing how we are part of a web of connections and support – we may be being supported with cables, seat belts, scientific principles, the natural world, people who have gone before, and when we are out in the world, there are probably many others who love us, or who working for similar things that we may not yet have connected with, as well as the natural world supporting us
- 3) Being curious about something new – how does that really work? What would it feel like to ride a bicycle on a tightrope?
- 4) Being willing to let go of the old and step out into the new before the new is fully clear—our mind hasn't quite comprehended how it really works, but we start pedaling into the new way of doing things

- 5) Using our imagination for creating and living out new stories—I am someone courageous, who can learn new skills, and live in new ways; what are some other possibilities? Can I draw on dreams or skills from my childhood?

My sense of identity has changed many times in my life.

As I was growing up, I was a daughter and sister, part of a large local extended family, a good student, a United Methodist who regularly went to church with my family, a ballet dancer, and a violinist.

From there, I went through successive changes in how I saw myself many times in my life: (note that in the spoken sermon I decided to cut this list—you'll have to read a future book I write, or ask me questions to learn more about these changing identities)

- From family member of a large extended family, good student, explorer of languages and cultures, active United Methodist, violinist, and dancer
- To violin major and explorer of life in college
- To social change agent and explorer of Haitian culture (through a mission trip) in a community of United Methodist college students
- To peace activist and jail inmate
- To assistant campus minister with college students, attender of Quaker and congregational churches, and explorer of Mexican culture and social issues (through a “reverse” mission trip to Mexico)
- To baker at a summer camp
- To wife and seminary student and volunteer with Central American refugees, and interfaith explorer
- To United Methodist minister
- To part-time minister and part-time mom of one young boy
- To stay-at-home mom of two young boys
- To explorer of alternative health when the boys developed allergies, while working as a pastoral counselor, then as a social worker with at-risk middle school students
- To minister again in a new context while exploring ecopsychology, Native American spirituality, and South American shamanic tradition

- To songwriting and teaching about being part of an interconnected web of life
- To chaplain at a retirement community, violin teacher, and librarian
- To assistant minister in a UU congregation and student of the Diamond Heart spiritual path
- To campus minister and religious climate change activist
- To permaculture student and minister of small country churches and singer of opera songs
- To closeted and divorced lesbian minister, while working as part-time cook's assistant for an organic caterer on my day off
- To openly lesbian minister of a suburban Detroit church while being mother of two grown young men--in a sermon about a year ago I shared my story about coming out as lesbian while being minister of a United Methodist congregation
- To part-time minister, fundraiser, explorer of Rudolf Steiner's thinking, childcare worker, and once again religious climate change activist
- To lesbian in a partnered relationship
- To UU Director of Congregational Life, here in Coralville, Iowa, while I am still open to new things I may become

When I put this together in a list, it seems like an awful lot of changes in identity!

And yet our world is becoming a place where it is more common to have many changes of career, or family, or location, or community identity throughout our lives. And most of us have multiple identities, some of them on our own, some where we are leaders, others where we participate as part of a group, and others where we experience deeper challenges or oppression or lack of opportunity.

Yet there are common threads holding me together as who I am through all these changes.

- 1) I learned, especially from my parents, to be curious and adventurous. So I am always open to learning new things, and questioning what doesn't make sense
- 2) After being born in Scotland, and living with my parents in Germany for a year when I was very little, and even though I was too young to directly

remember those experiences, I have always had a sense of myself as a world citizen

- 3) I have always been part of or leader of at least one religious and/or spiritual community, but I have also always been exploring other spiritual paths
- 4) I want to have a life that feels whole: with family, community, and creativity, using my body, mind, emotions, and spirit
- 5) After growing up with a large extended family, I have always been drawn to being part of community
- 6) I want to make a difference in the world through the work that I do and the way I live my life

It helps when going through change, to be able to have a larger and more general sense of yourself, that can adapt to change, rather than more narrow definitions that require us to let go of more of a sense of identity when we go through change.

Sometimes we choose change because of an inner sense that we want something different and better for ourselves, or our families, or the world. Sometimes we are attracted to something new that we want to explore, and it leads to change. Sometimes we are thrown into change because of outside circumstances or life practicalities.

Some of the changes I made were about facing practical realities. In high school I had played for three years with the Chicago Youth Symphony, as well as my high school orchestra. I loved exploring emotion through music, so as I was preparing to enter college, I imagined myself as a musician, and I was accepted as a violin major at the University of Michigan.

However, I soon learned that while I was a good violin player, I was not the best, and I would have to spend many hours a day practicing in order to be good enough to make any kind of a living playing classical music. So I followed my curiosity in other directions. After taking a course called, "Why the Rich Get Richer, and the Poor Get Prison", I decided I wanted to learn more about social justice. My identity shifted more to becoming a social change agent, and I ended up designing my own independent major in social change.

After I campus ministry retreat in my senior year in college, where we saw a movie about the horrors of nuclear weapons, I felt called to make a dramatic stand for peace. Along with many others, I knelt in the driveway of a company that made cruise missile engines, and then I ended up in jail for a month. I had to let in the identity of being someone who had spent time in jail.

Because of that experience of standing up for my beliefs in peace to the point of jail time, I spoke to a lot of church groups, and my identity shifted towards doing social change work through churches.

After college, I took a position for two years assisting with programming at a progressive campus ministry, got married while there, and decided to go to seminary together with my husband.

I loved all the classes I was taking in seminary, but it took a while for me to really imagine myself as a minister. And I kept wanting to explore things like my spiritual connections to nature, feminist theology, pagan Goddess religion, interfaith dialogue with Jewish and Christian seminary students, and Scottish music and dance.

But after many challenging experiences, and working in a church while I was in seminary, to practice what I was learning, I eventually decided that I could imagine myself as a minister.

In 1990 I graduated from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and began my first position as an ordained minister: an associate minister at a United Methodist church in Michigan. It was surprising to find a ready-made community each time I moved to a new church, and to be accepted as a leader almost immediately because of my role as minister.

My next identity shift was as I became a mother, after Carter and I had been married for seven years and were ministers at different churches. After our first son Jeremiah was born, I shifted to working part-time as a minister. I was amazed at how my body could first hold a growing child before birth, then create the nutrition he needed after he was born. I read a lot about parenting, and the books I was drawn to focused on natural ways of parenting, with a focus on nursing your child, and having contact with your child a lot by carrying them around.

We found a crib that we could take off one side, and put it right next to our bed, so when Jeremiah woke up, I didn't need to even get out of bed. I could just roll him over next to me. And once he was used to sleeping near us, it didn't seem natural to make him sleep by himself in another room, so when he was out of the crib, we just put a mattress on the floor next to the bed.

When our second son Isaac was born, he was in the crib on one side of the bed, and Jeremiah was on the mattress on the floor on the other side of the bed, by Carter. Eventually, we moved both boys out of our room together into a double bed in the room next to ours. My style of parenting became a large part of my identity. I really hadn't had too many models of other people parenting in the same way. But it felt right when I stayed with my senses and the reality of my relationship with my boys and family.

While I was pastoring a United Methodist church, I was also exploring South American shamanism, and was part of a Native American spirituality group for a few months. I also began taking and teaching what turned into two years of online courses in ecopsychology—focusing on our nonverbal senses in nature. I began questioning my Christian identity when I was experiencing what felt like spiritual connections with the natural world, which did not require a connection with Jesus, or understanding Bible stories more deeply. In fact, a lot of the process of using our senses in nature involved letting go of our stories, in order to see what was really true in the moment with our senses.

Many of us went through a process of letting go and change to end up being a part of Unitarian Universalism. I know some of you had bad experiences in another religious community, some of you never had a religious community, some of you did a lot of searching and looking and struggling before coming here.

My process was probably a little different than many of you, since I first became part of a UU congregation after facing the practical reality that trying to make a living being a retreat leader and musician was not working. I had had some experience of Unitarian Universalism, and knew the local UU congregation in Ann Arbor had 45 acres of land. So I asked some questions, and because of a unique circumstance that the senior minister was about to retire, and the assistant

minister had just announced she was leaving, they were looking for a short term assistant minister. So I was invited to become their Acting Assistant Minister.

I knew that there was a lot more freedom in beliefs and spiritual practices and a strong focus on social justice and nature connections in Unitarian Universalism, and that appealed to me. But all the same, most of my family has been strongly and actively United Methodist, including my former husband, Carter, who was also a United Methodist minister. So it felt dramatic to consider and publicly announce taking on leadership in another denomination, and one that wasn't even specifically Christian.

It feels like the stage of change of being in the wilderness is where it is hardest to remain. The wilderness is where you have either already left the old way of being, or you at least know you need to, but where the way ahead is not yet clear, and where part of you is longing to be back where you were before, because uncertainty is just part of the landscape in the wilderness.

In this place of wilderness you are not sure if there is solid ground beneath you, you are trying to figure out how to move forward, and even which way is forward, and you have to trust in other people or in things you don't fully understand, or haven't yet imagined.

Kind of like riding a bicycle on a tightrope.

The time we live in is full of change and chaos. Hotter summers, more storms, constantly changing technology, factories closing, shootings and hate crimes happening too often, government leaders acting in hateful ways we had not previously imagined, businesses failing or starting up or downsizing or merging or having scandals.

Where do we put our trust in the midst of all these changes? What is it that provides the stability? What is it that gives us the courage to move forward in a new way, a new pattern rather than stay stuck in a pattern that used to work?

Earlier in the service I led a meditation where we focused on our breathing, and reminded us that with each breath we are breathing in a gift of oxygen from the trees and plants, and when we breathe out, we are breathing out the carbon

dioxide that they need to grow. That exercise introduced you to a small piece of learning I got from my courses in ecopsychology. In all of the courses, which were created and offered through Dr. Michael Cohen and Project NatureConnect in Washington state, there was a strong emphasis on actually spending time outdoors, in relationship to natural areas right here and now. All of the natural world keeps in balance through nonverbal sensory relationships and intelligence. When a plant needs more sun, it bends and grows to reach the sun. When the days get shorter and cooler, many birds are attracted to migrate to where it is warmer, and other animals are attracted to eat a lot, and burrow in for hibernation.

In the exercises and training I had, we learned about 53 different senses and ways of perceiving that help us keep in balance with all of the natural world. When we are thirsty we are attracted to water; when we are hungry our body can often lead us to what we most need to eat; when something smells bad we are attracted to fresh, clean air; when it is hot, we are attracted to where there is shade, or breeze, or cooler air. When things are too serious, our sense of humor may lead us to find a light-hearted or humorous approach. When we have been sitting still too long, we are attracted to moving around. When we are in the presence of something wonderful, we feel joy or awe, and just want to savor it.

Often following our attractions and senses in the moment means we can be satisfied with something much simpler than we think when we focus on stories we tell ourselves of what we need or want.

Whether the change we are dealing with has to do with our personal life, family, job, community, or is spiritual, societal, political, or environmental, we face the tension between hanging on to things, beliefs, ways of living, or stepping out and exploring something new.

It can be a big help if we develop the skills to know

- 1) how we are grounded in our bodies in the moment,
- 2) how we are part of the web of human and nature connections around us,
- 3) how to be curious to learn about something new,
- 4) how to live with not knowing some of the time,
- 5) how to use our imaginations and creativity to move into something new.

When we know something of these skills, we are much more likely to be resilient through change.

We have already come through many changes together here at UUS, and we will still be facing changes and uncertainty in this year of preparation and search for a new minister.

Are you ready to ride a bicycle on a tightrope with me?